

A Discussion Guide

to the Award-Winning Works of

Nina LaCour



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"Click.

Ingrid's fingers covered in silver rings . . .

Click.

The huge red sunglasses that covered half her face.

Click.

The pink-and-white scars on her stomach . . .

Click.

A deep cut on her arm, bleeding."



Caitlin, devastated by the suicide of her best friend, uses photography, a discovered journal, and budding relationships to deal with, and overcome, this tragic loss. In Nina LaCour's searing and hopeful debut novel, *Hold Still*, we experience the devastation that a tragic loss can produce, and the good that can come from rising above it.

Praise

A 2010 William C. Morris Honor Book

A 2010 YALSA Best Books for Young Adults

★ "LaCour makes an **impressive** debut with an emotionally charged young adult novel about **friendship and loss.**"
— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ "A **fresh voice** to the world of young adult literature."
— *VOYA*, starred review

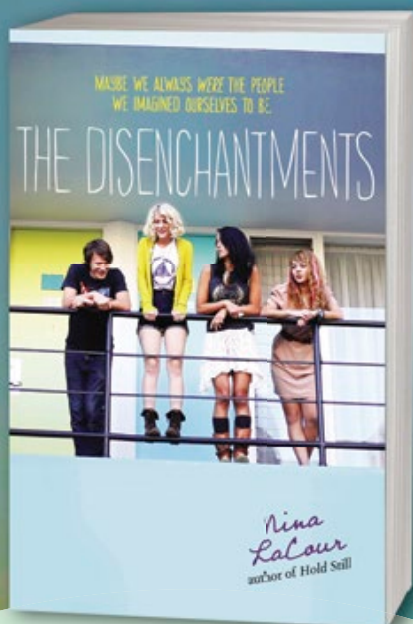
Discussion Questions

1. As you read, look for use of the term “HOLD STILL.” For instance, on page 9, Caitlin thinks, “I hold still and stop counting. I wait to hear more, but minutes pass, and then the whistle of Dad’s snore begins, followed by Mom’s even breaths.” What is the meaning and importance of this term as it is used in each of these examples?
2. Mia Nolting’s **ILLUSTRATIONS** are found throughout *Hold Still*. In what ways do her illustrations support the text of the novel, especially the self-portrait from Ingrid’s journal found on page 39?
3. Are the settings of *Hold Still* significant to the story? Could the story have been set somewhere else? Give examples. How would a different setting have impacted the story? Look for details that establish the **SETTINGS** of *Hold Still*. Consider time, place, season, and mood. For instance, Los Cerros, Highway 1, summer, the ocean, Northern California, and dense trees are mentioned as the story begins. Why do you think that the author chose the particular settings that she did?
4. *Hold Still* begins in “summer” and progresses through “fall,” “winter,” “spring,” and “summer again.” How are the **SEASONS** reflected in the illustrations and in the action of the story? What do each of the seasons symbolize in terms of the action and arc of the story?
5. Caitlin tells us that, “I’d forgotten how I called Ingrid one night after practicing for the test with my dad and told her, *This summer I’ll drive us anywhere. Where do you want to go? Name a place and I’ll drive us,*” (page 105) until the day she drives herself to the different locations in order to deliver the pages of Ingrid’s journal to the people who were important to her. What does the development of Caitlin’s relationship with her car and driving **SYMBOLIZE** about her personal journey?
6. Caitlin is an **ARTIST** and a **PHOTOGRAPHER**, as was Ingrid. Their photography provides Caitlin with both **WINDOWS** through which she can see into the lives of others, and **MIRRORS** in which she can herself reflected. Look for and discuss moments when Caitlin uses both her artistic eye, and her’s and Ingrid’s art to see herself reflected. For instance, on page 19, Caitlin says of one of Ingrid’s photographs of her, “Soon I was staring at a face that looked completely unfamiliar, nothing like a girl who grew up in a rich suburb with loving parents and her own bathroom.” What does she see? Does her reflection change?
7. On pages 21–22, Caitlin describes the first time she met Ingrid. Describe the arc of their **FRIENDSHIP** from this moment until the end of the book. Caitlin then describes seeing Dylan Schuster for the first time on pages 23–24. What does Caitlin learn about friendship through these relationships? What does she mean toward the end of the book when she says, “. . . then it hits me. This is how it feels to have friends”? (page 198)
8. What was your initial response when Caitlin’s dad surprises her with a pile of wood? Caitlin initially scoffs at the idea, “. . . that this is supposed to be some alternative to therapy.” (page 31) However, does what she eventually decides to do with the wood become an effective form of therapy? Explain. What does her building of the **TREEHOUSE** symbolize about her journey?
9. Caitlin tells us on page 44, “I know that when I finish reading Ingrid’s journal, there won’t be anything new between us ever again. . . . I’m going to try to make her last.” Why do you think the author chose to bring Ingrid to life for us through her **JOURNAL**? Is the journal an effective method for delivering much of the story to the reader?
10. On page 194, Caitlin says, “Hope starts over.” What does this statement mean? Do you agree? Does *Hold Still* leave the reader with a sense of **HOPE**? Discuss.

"If I had to choose the moment

that I fell in love with Bev, that would probably be . . . every time I drew her . . . Or when we sat on my living room floor with maps of Europe laid out all around us . . . And lying here right now, after everything, I fall in love with her again."

Colby is in love with his best friend, Bev. They have just graduated from high school and are about to embark on a tour with Bev's all girl band, The Disenchantments, after which Colby and Bev intend to spend a gap year exploring Europe. However, Colby's journey up the West Coast with the band turns his world upside down. Everything he thought he knew, and dreamed of, changes as he meets new people and begins to see Bev, his friends, and himself in new ways. Nina LaCour's stunning road trip novel explores issues of destiny versus free will, regret, love, coming of age, and friendship. This is a journey to remember!



Praise

A 2013 YALSA Best Books for Young Adults

A *Kirkus* Best Teen Book of 2012

★ "A **rich tapestry** that will make readers confident that they are in the hands of a **master storyteller.**"
— *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ "**Enchanting** . . . this **realistic** novel will hit home."
— *School Library Journal*, starred review

★ "**Astonishing.**" — *Booklist*, starred review

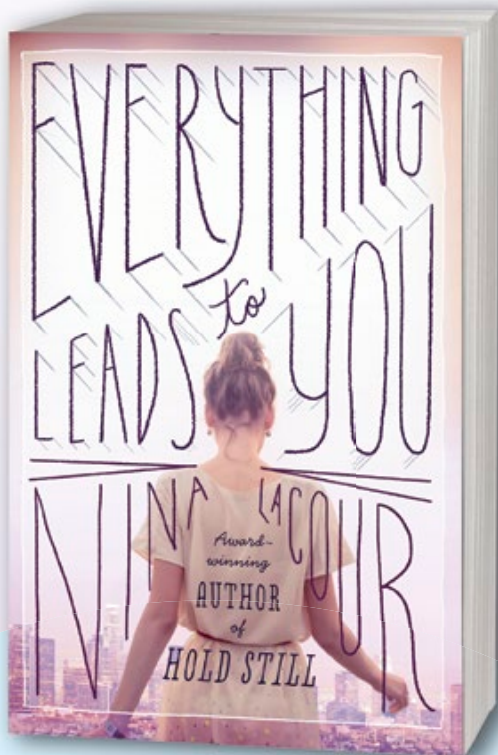
★ "Make this book a part of your collection — you will not be disappointed." — *VOYA*, starred review

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the author establish **SETTING** (time, place, mood) in each of the locations in the novel? For instance, consider the many details she uses in creating San Francisco for the reader: the Bay Area, Haight Street, the Mission, and Van Ness. Also consider passages such as this one found on page 23: "It's still morning but it's warm already. . . . and even though I've crossed this bridge a thousand times, something feels different. The sky, the water, the people walking along the footpaths, and all the cars ahead of us and behind us." How does the establishment of setting add to the book's authenticity? Could *The Disenchantments* have been set in another location? Where? How would this have changed the story?
2. When Bev announces that she is not going to Europe with Colby, as they have been planning for the past several years, and is instead going to the Rhode Island School of Design, Colby feels his life is falling apart. Share an example of a time in which your way of viewing the world, and your vision of the future, have shifted significantly. What happened? In what ways did your world shift? In the end, do you feel this shift was a positive or a negative in your life?
3. A significant **THEME** found in *The Disenchantments* has to do with the ideas of **FATE** and **DESTINY** versus **FREE WILL** and **CHOICE**. Define each of these terms. Discuss the passages related to the theme of fate and destiny versus free will and choice. At the novel's end, do you agree with the notion that our lives are controlled by fate and destiny, or by free will and choice?
4. On page 38, Colby tells us that his **ART** is an outlet for him in difficult circumstances: "I slump onto the grass and pull my sketchbook and pencil out of my backpack because drawing is the only way I'll survive this detour before going back home to start my life over, or at least try to figure out the next step." What do you use as an outlet to help get you through trying times? Is this behavior helpful or hurtful?
5. Even though the four main characters in the book are observant, they often misjudge others. For instance, for years both Colby and Bev misjudge situations involving Bev's parents. Discuss their misjudgments and the consequences. Bev says on page 203, "It's incredible . . . how much damage everyone does to everybody else." Is this true? What role does her own misjudgment play in this damage? How could this have been avoided?
6. How does Colby see Bev as their trip begins? Are his observations accurate and realistic? Do you see Bev in the same way? What does the reader know about her that Colby doesn't see? Discuss clues that Colby gets which suggest that the way he has seen Bev in the past might not be accurate? For instance, on page 64, Colby sees Bev talking to a guy before their show. How does this incident begin to shift his perceptions of Bev and of himself?
7. Meg tells us on page 89 that, ". . . the beautiful thing about me is that I never regret anything. Ever." What are **REGRETS**? Is it true throughout the story that Meg seems to have no regrets? What about Alexa, Bev, and Colby? Give specific examples. Do you feel that their regret, or lack thereof, is justified? Do you, personally, have any significant regrets or sorrows or remorse, things you wish you hadn't said or done?
8. Think about the individuals that Colby, Bev, Alexa, and Meg meet on their road trip—Walt, Jasper, Melvin, Sophie, Drew and Melanie, Rene, and Abbie. What do you know about each of them? What is their purpose and importance in the story?
9. What is the arc of Colby's, Bev's, Alexa's, and Meg's characters throughout the story? Do they change?
10. Consider the ending of *The Disenchantments*. Is Melanie ultimately right? Despite the hardships that each of the characters face, is everything "okay" for them in the end? Is the book, then, ultimately **HOPEFUL**? Discuss.

Emi and her best friend, Charlotte, are about to graduate from high school and are interning for a production designer on a new film. As a graduation gift, Emi's brother, Toby, lets them stay at his place while he is in Europe scouting locations for a new movie. However, there is one condition: "I want you to do something

with the place. Something epic. . . . I mean, something great has to take place here while I'm gone. . . . That's all I'm gonna say on the subject. . . . The rest is up to you." Their "epic" adventure begins while they are hunting for a set piece for the film they are working on and end up in the home of recently deceased acting icon, Clyde Jones. What they find there, inside a Patsy Cline album, leads them to mystery, romance, and self-discovery!



Praise

★ "Underneath the privilege surges real pain, **longing**, and **feeling** in a way that makes it easy to imagine this novel as a film."
— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"This **sensitive, multifaceted** novel creates an **authentic** portrayal of the ups and downs of life. . . . An **absorbing** Hollywood read."
— *Kirkus Reviews*

"This is **summer love** for the ages."
— *Booklist*

Discussion Questions

1. What are your impressions of the **SETTING** of the book? Why is this of places like Venice Beach, Chateau Marmont, Leona Valley, Santa Monica Pier, etc. particularly appropriate for this novel?
2. It becomes clear early in *Everything Leads to You* that the **FILM INDUSTRY** will be significant to the book. In what ways does Nina LaCour bring the film industry to life for the reader and make this world seem authentic? In what ways is *Everything Leads to You* an ode to filmmaking?
3. Ava tells Emi, on page 162 that her first real love was a girl, Lisa: “‘She was afraid people would find out about us. . . . So she confessed to her parents. . . . The reverend of her church blames gay people for everything. Like every storm and national tragedy is a manifestation of God’s wrath. . . . Tracey’s a congregant there, too.’” How do this religious leader’s teachings impact Ava’s relationships? Does Tracey ever accept this part of Ava? **COMPARE** and **CONTRAST** Ava and Emi in terms of the role that sexuality has played in their lives.
4. Emi has a feeling from the moment that she steps into Clyde Jones’s home that she is meant to be there, that it is her **FATE**, her **DESTINY**. Define fate and destiny. How are they different from **FREE WILL** and **CHOICE**? Fate and destiny are a recurring **THEME** in Nina LaCour’s work. What role do fate and destiny play in *Everything Leads to You*?
5. On pages 16-17 Emi thinks, “‘I’m trying to push away the heavy feeling that’s descending now, that has been so often lately, but I’m having trouble. A few months ago it seemed like high school was going to last forever, like our college planning was for a distant and indistinct future. . . . I expected graduation to feel like freedom, but instead I’m finding myself a little bit lost.’” Emi is at a pivotal time in her life. What are the ways in which she is straddling both the teenage and the adult world? As a result of where she is at, *Everything Leads to You* could be considered a **COMING OF AGE** novel, a common **THEME** found in young adult literature. How does Emi come of age, or become an adult, in the novel and why do these changes occur. What other characters do you feel come of age in *Everything Leads to You*?
6. The role that one’s **PAST** plays in his or her **NOW** is explored in *Everything Leads to You*. Ava knows little about her past. Her adoptive mom tells her that there is no use in dwelling on the past. Ava says on page 293, “‘I do have a right. It’s my *life*. . . . I have a right to know where I come from. . . . I’ve been learning all of these things I never knew. . . . We only have one life. *This life*.’” Who do you agree with? Why? Does the past influence who these characters are now? Is this true in real life as well?
7. On page 112, Emi says, “‘. . . all the best stories are **TRAGIC**,’” when she tells Ava about events that have occurred at the Chateau Marmont. Do you feel as Emi does? Are the best stories tragic (another literary genre)? Explain. Would you consider *Everything Leads to You* a tragedy?
8. When Emi considers her life compared to Ava’s, she thinks, “‘The truth is I don’t know anyone who has led Ava’s kind of life. I divide my time between a world of relatively well-adjusted families and private school and the world of filmmaking, where the stories are often filled with all of this—young troubled women, rejection and death and love.’” (page 117) Later, Jamal decides to stay in the shelter, rather than move in with Ava into her new penthouse. He says to Emi, “‘We don’t all have it figured out. We don’t all have internships and colleges all lined up and our parents’ credit cards. . . . We don’t all have brothers getting us fancy jobs in movie studios.’” (page 240) Does Emi lead a privileged life? How does this impact her relationships with others, especially Ava and Jamal? Does a person of **PRIVILEGE** have any responsibilities toward those who are not privileged?
9. Once Ava discovers who her grandfather is, she could rely on her **PEDIGREE** to get what she wants. However, she decides, “‘If I’m going to get cast in this movie I want it to be because they think I’m right for the part. If I get it, I want it to get it because I’m good.’” (page 144) What is the lesson here? How do you feel about Ava when she makes this choice?
10. Do Emi and Charlotte succeed in accomplishing Toby’s one condition for staying at his place, doing something “**EPIC**,” by the end of the novel? If so, what do they accomplish?

"Tragedy....Heartbreak....Betrayal...."

These are all things that change a person. If we endure them and we aren't changed, then something is wrong."

It is the beginning of winter break at a college in Upstate New York. Marin finds herself alone in the dorm with a snowstorm looming. Four months ago, she fled from San Francisco and all she had ever known, and now finds that New York and the dorm are her "home." When her best friend, Mabel, arrives after a four-month separation, the two of them wrestle with the tragedy, heartbreak, and betrayal that Marin has left behind. Both of them, and their relationship, are changed, but they emerge from their three days together knowing that they will be "okay."



Praise

Winner of the 2018 Michael L. Printz Medal

- ★ "LaCour paints a captivating depiction of loss, bewilderment, and emotional paralysis . . . **raw and beautiful.**"
— *Booklist*, starred review
 - ★ "Beautifully crafted. . . . **A quietly moving, potent novel.**"
— *School Library Journal*, starred review
 - ★ "A **moving portrait of a girl struggling to rebound** after everything she's known has been thrown into disarray."
— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review
- "A meditation on surviving grief, *We Are Okay* is short, poetic and gorgeously written."** — *The New York Times Book Review*

Discussion Questions

1. As you read, look for passages where the author uses the phrase, “We are okay.” For instance, the novel begins with the line, “Before Hannah left, she asked if I was sure I’d be okay.” In the end, are each of the characters “okay”?
2. Marin feels a profound sense of **LONELINESS** as *We Are Okay* begins. She thinks, “If only I had something to take the edge off the loneliness. If only *lonely* were a more accurate word. It should sound much less pretty. . . . I know that I am always alone, even when surrounded by people, so I let the emptiness in. . . . There are many ways of being alone. That’s something I know to be true.” (pages 7–8). How is it possible to be “alone even when surrounded by people”? What does Marin mean when she says this?
3. What are the “many ways of being alone”? As you read, look for the sources of Marin’s loneliness, how she copes with them, and how she eventually begins to overcome this loneliness. Look also for examples of Gramps’s loneliness and how he coped with it. How is Marin’s loneliness different from her grandfather’s?
4. Consider the importance of **SETTING** (time, place, season, weather, mood) in *We Are Okay*. Compare and contrast the place Marin has left (San Francisco, California) with where she is now (Upstate New York). Look for the details Nina LaCour uses to create the different aspects of setting. She uses words like “California sunshine,” “beach glass,” “waves crashing in,” “sky,” and “redwood trees,” to describe California. On the other hand, she uses terms like “biting cold,” “bright silver moon,” “stillness,” and “mountains” to describe New York. In what ways are the settings symbolic of the person that Marin was and is, and her life in each of these places?
5. Rather than following a linear timeline, LaCour switches back and forth between the present and the past throughout the novel. How does the author use **TIME** in the novel? How does this affect the movement of the story? How does it impact you as a reader?
6. There is a small cast of characters (both those we actually meet, and those we only hear about) in the novel. Which characters are **CENTRAL**, and which are **SECONDARY** to the story? Are they complex, multidimensional individuals or one-dimensional characters? Which of these characters have a clear and interesting story **ARC**? What is Marin’s relationship with both herself and the other characters in the story, especially her relationships with Mabel and Gramps? Who is the most interesting character in the story in your opinion? Which character do you like the best? Why?
7. A recurring **THEME** found in *We Are Okay* has to do with both figurative and literal **GHOSTS**. For instance, ghosts are first mentioned on pages 23–24 in the novel. Marin tells us, “In English, we were talking about ghosts. About whether they were there at all, and if they were, whether they were . . . evil . . .” Later she says, “We can search for the truth, we can convince ourselves of whatever we want to believe, but we’ll never actually know. . . .” And, at the groundskeeper’s house during the snowstorm, Marin thinks, “But now there is stillness and drips of candle wax and quiet. There are the ghosts of who we used to be.” (page 114) Both Marin and Gramps are haunted by “ghosts.” Who and what are their ghosts, and how do they deal with them? In the end, do they deal with their ghosts effectively? What are the consequences of how they deal with them?
8. **GRIEF** is a palpable emotion in *We Are Okay*. Which characters are experiencing grief in the story? What is the source of their grief, and how are they handling it?
9. Think about **STUFF** and the role it plays in Marin’s life. Discuss the William Morris quote mentioned on page 37: “. . . everything you own should be either useful or beautiful.” How is this idea evident in Marin’s dorm room? Why is it so sparse, and how is this a **METAPHOR** for what she is feeling inside? Look for clues about the “stuff” in her life before the death of Gramps (the picture of her mother, the Christmas ornaments, and the blue-and-gold blanket, for example) and as the story begins (the pottery bowls and plant, for instance). Once Mabel arrives, Marin’s feelings about stuff begin to change. What evidence do we have of this change?
10. What role does the **WATER** and the **OCEAN** play in the novel? It is the ocean that takes Marin’s mother and, ultimately, her grandfather. Of Claire’s death, she thinks, “I guess when you spend a life riding waves—knowing that the ocean is heartless and millions of times stronger than you are, but still trusting that you’re skilled . . . enough to survive it—you become indebted to the people who don’t make it. Someone always dies. It’s just a matter of who, and when. You remember her with songs, with shrines of shells and flowers and beach glass . . .” (pages 30–31) In what ways is the ocean both an **ANTAGONIST** and a **PROTAGONIST** in the story?
11. On page 104–105, Marin thinks, “If I could undo that decision in the police station, I wouldn’t have left through the back. The two weeks in the motel would never have happened and the thought of diner coffee wouldn’t make me choke.” Why might she regret this action? What other regrets does she have? Do any of the other characters have regrets? Is there any value in having regrets? Why or why not?

Further Discussion

MUSIC in Nina LaCour's Work

1. In *The Disenchanted*, When Colby asks Meg, "'Why'd you buy a record if you don't have any way to play it?'" Meg says, "'Because . . . that's what you do when someone tells you something is great. You take that risk.'" (page 136) Do you agree? How does music bring these characters, as well as other characters in *The Disenchanted*, together?
2. Music plays a large role in *Everything Leads to You* from the beginning with the discovery of the Patsy Cline album. Later, while on the 405, stuck in traffic, Emi and Charlotte turn on "The Knife." Emi says, ". . . I am a firm believer that important moments in life are best with a sound track . . ." (page 21) Do you agree? Share examples of people, events, or emotions from your own life that you associate with a particular song or musician?
3. Hans Christian Anderson once said, "When words fail, music speaks." Discuss this statement. **MUSIC** is a significant **THEME** found throughout *Hold Still* and much of Nina LaCour's work. Caitlin thinks on page 47, "It was the moment I realized what music can do to people, how it can make you hurt and feel so good all at once." Do you agree with Caitlin's statement?
4. How does the addition of music to a novel impact the setting, themes, and tone of the book?

MENTAL HEALTH in Nina LaCour's Work

1. Mental health plays a significant role in many of Nina LaCour's books. Are there any similarities or differences in how mental health is approached or treated in any of LaCour's work?
2. In *The Disenchanted*, Meg has suffered from panic attacks since she was in sixth grade, for which she has seen a therapist and takes medication. What lessons might the reader learn from Meg and her experiences? Can you think of examples from current events that would support Nina LaCour's message here?
3. Marin's grandfather in *We Are Okay* was suffering from mental health issues. When she looks back, Marin identifies clues that she either missed or chose to ignore, that were evidence that Gramps had both physical and mental health issues. What were these clues? Marin feels guilty for not having done more. Should she? What actions could she have taken on Gramps's behalf? Did Gramps have a support system? What do you surmise actually happened to Gramps on the day he disappeared? Does Marin herself suffer from mental health issues? How does she cope with her issues? Does she have a support system? If so, who? How do you know?
4. In *Hold Still*, Caitlin overhears her parents talking on page 8, saying things like, ". . . clinically depressed; medication; since she was nine years old . . ." On the first day of school in the fall, Taylor asks Caitlin, "' . . . how did she do it?'" (page 17) we realize that Caitlin is dealing with the loss of someone significant to her through suicide and mental health issues. Do you feel that we as a society deal effectively with those who are suffering from a mental illness? What resources are you aware of that are available for teens dealing with mental health issues?

Further Exploration

1. The 2018 **MICHAEL L. PRINTZ AWARD** was presented to Nina LaCour for her novel, *We Are Okay*. This prestigious award is given to an author of a young adult book “. . . that exemplifies literary excellence.” When selecting a winner, the awards committee considers story, voice, style, setting, accuracy, characters, and theme in books appropriate for audiences anywhere from twelve to eighteen years old. What are these aspects of *We Are Okay* and what makes them exceptional?
2. Nina LaCour’s first book was *Hold Still* and her most recent book is *We Are Okay*. Are there any themes or common threads that connect the two books?
3. Now that you have read several of Nina LaCour’s works, consider some of the characteristics of her work. What role, for instance, do these characteristics play in her writing:
 - art, especially photography
 - music
 - literature
 - setting, especially California characterization
 - deep, complex, multilayered characters
 - diversity—windows and mirrors
 - self-image
 - regret
 - nostalgia
 - sexual identity
 - destiny and fate
 - mental health
 - loss and grief
 - hope—everything will be okay

Are there any additional characteristics found in Nina LaCour’s writing that stand out for you?

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About Nina LaCour

Nina LaCour is the author of the widely acclaimed *Hold Still*, *The Disenchantments*, *Everything Leads to You*, and the 2018 Printz Medal winner *We Are Okay*. She is also the coauthor, with David Levithan of *You Know Me Well*. Formerly a bookseller and high school English teacher, she now writes and parents full time. A San Francisco Bay Area native, Nina lives with her family in Martinez, California. Find her online at www.ninalacour.com.



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